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ABSTRACT

Both Mexican American and Anglo students in four Corpus Christi (Texas) high schools seek membership in various subcultures according to which one recognizes them as being socially competent and respectable human beings. Data consist of life history interviews, observations, and questionnaire responses from over 600 youth. Mexican American students have more difficulties conforming to the "official" norms of the school and society than Anglos, although they are no less likely to embrace those norms as ideal. Also, Mexican American youth are more likely to be denied the respect and esteem of their peers and their teachers. Faced with the need to adapt to the reality of the school environment, members of both Mexican American and Anglo groups, however, tend to become identified with one of six subcultures: "preppies," college bound children of professionals; "kickers," cowboys with little concern for school; "achievement motivated strivers," working class youth dedicated to upward mobility; "dues payers," working class youth who are serious and respectful, but who do not do well in school; "good timers," who pay little attention to school norms; and Chicanos, who refuse to conform to the norms of middle class Anglo society. (KC)

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LEARNING TO ADAPT: INFLUENCES UPON THE LEARNING BEHAVIOR OF ADOLESCENTS IN A SOUTH TEXAS CITY

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Any anthropological investigation of learning in school necessarily must take into account a broader sociocultural context. What the appropriate context is for such studies, however, is a matter of considerable debate. For example, John Ogbu (1981) described the approach which he took in his investigation of the education of Black Americans in Stockton, California as macroethnographic. He described how the economic and social structure of Stockton influenced educational policies and politics in the schools. Further, he argued that American society, in general, and Stockton, in particular, traditionally have maintained a caste-like stratification system. The system has, and to some extent still does, obstruct or at least impede access for Blacks, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans to high status occupations for which advanced schooling is a necessary prerequisite (1979). Because these high status jobs have long been denied to those segments of the population which he called "caste minorities", Ogbu argues that Black, Mexican-Americans and Puerto Rican youths are less likely than others to become effectively socialized through schooling for occupations and statusses that traditionally have been out of reach. For these reasons, Ogbu is critical of studies that attempt to explain the disproportionate rate of school failure of minority youths by referring to their values, lack of motivation, intelligence, differences between majority and minority cultures, or miscommunication in the classroom (1981).

In contrast, Frederick Erikson, among others, insists that since it is individual human beings who learn, the primary focus of anthropological studies of education should be upon "individual thought and action as it takes place in immediate environments of learning" (Erikson, 1982:152). Erikson does not deny the relevance of social structure or political economy to the study of learning, but cautions that there is a tradeoff between breadth of analysis and specificity. By focussing on the influence of family, peer group, or patterns of communication between students and teachers, one runs the risk of not understanding the general ecology of the forest due to an over-riding interest in a particular kind of tree nearby. On the other hand, by focussing primarily on class or social stratification one may lose sight of more immediate influences over the beliefs, values and actions of living, breathing human beings. As was succinctly put in the epigram of T.J.G. Locher, "One should not confuse totality with completeness. The whole is more than the assembled parts, but it is surely also less" (In Wallerstein, 1974:8).

A theoretical challenge recognized by Erikson, Ogbu, Judith Hansen (1979) and a growing number of anthropologists is to integrate the study of social structure with the study of influences upon the behavior of individuals -- albeit individuals belonging to particular classes or ethnic groups. While many studies have shown that being of a particular

socioeconomic status or belonging to a minority group is related to the type of experiences one has in school. One's position in the social structure does not directly determine academic success or failure. Rather, it will be argued here that social structure differentially distributes resources and challenges relevant for achievement in terms of the "official" values of school and society. The configuration of resources confronting youths from different segments of society influence the liklihood of experiencing success and recognition, or, conversely, failure and derision, for one's efforts in pursuit of the mastery of academic and other skills defined by the school as relevant for success in society. The recognition or derision received for one's efforts, in turn, influences the liklihood of identifying with one of a number of alternative youth subcultures. In that these subcultures define meaning and value in the context of day to day interaction with significant others, subcultural affiliation is perhaps the most immediate if not the most important influence upon students' perceptions of what is relevant in learning to adapt to one's surroundings.

THE CORPUS CHRISTI STUDY

The information to be presented here was compiled as part of a research project whose primary purpose was the investigation of biological, psychological and sociocultural influences upon the blood pressures of adolescents in Corpus Christi, Texas. These data were gathered during two years of research in four Corpus Christi area high schools. Working in the schools as a guest health teacher from the local ped-

iatric hospital, there was ample opportunity to observe interaction among students and between students and teachers. In addition, life history interviews were conducted and questionaires were administered regarding social and demographic characteristics and psychosocial adaptation.

The four schools in which the research was conducted provided a sample that was representative of the adolescent population of Corpus Christi. Mexican-Americans constituted 61% of study participants; 34% were Anglo; 4% were Black, and; 1% identified themselves as something other than the first three categories.* During the course of fieldwork, it became apparent that Mexican-American youths, on average, received poorer grades for their academic work and were less likely to graduate from high school than were the Anglo students. In one predominantly Mexican-American school, less than half the number of students who entered as freshmen completed their senior year. In response to an item on one of the questionaires, almost 50% of Anglo students reported that they got mostly "A's" and "B's" on their report cards compared to only 19% of Mexican-Americans (TABLE 1). Only 16% of Anglos reported getting mostly "C's" and "D's" or "D's" and "F's" compared to 32% of Mexican-Americans.

It has long been argued that public education is a means to promote equal opportunity and to eliminate inequality in society. However, to the extent that educational performance

* Because of the small number of Blacks and youths who identified themselves as "other", the discussion will be confined to findings regarding Mexican-American and Anglo youths.

in high school predicts future socioeconomic status, it would appear that the inequalities that have existed between Mexican-Americans and Anglos since Texas became independent from Mexico in 1836 are not being eliminated by the schools. The difference between Mexican-American and Anglo adults in certain indicators of socioeconomic status is dramatic. At the time the study was conducted, 31% of Mexican-Americans in Corpus Christi had incomes below the federal poverty line compared to only 7% of Anglos. 53% of Mexican-Americans in Corpus Christi had incomes that were less than 150% of the poverty line. 65% of Mexican-American youths participating in this study indicated that neither of their parents had graduated from high school as compared to only 9.2% for Anglos. 35% of Anglo youths reported that at least one of their parents had a college degree as compared to only 6% for Mexican-Americans. Not only were Mexican-American students much more likely to be from low income families and to have difficulties with their school work, but according to responses to the questionaire items regarding psychosocial adaptation, they also faced greater difficulties in their psychosocial adjustment at school. Mexican-American youths were more lkely to indicate that they "feel that they are just not making it in this school" (Q #7), they were "having trouble figuring out what the teachers want them to do" (Q #43), were less likely to"understand what to do and how to act in order to do well in school" (Q #9), and were less likely to feel that

they"fit in and can relate well to people in this school" (Q #10). In light of the information presented thusfar, the question that must be answeered now is: Why is the inequality between Mexican-American and Anglo adults apparently being replicated in a new generation of high school students?

The explanation most often given by teachers for the disproportionate rate of school failure by Mexican-American students was that there was a lack of motivation to do well in school. On the basis of extensive observation and the responses to questionaire items regarding motivation, it appears that this explanation is incorrect or, at best, misleading. Mexican-American and Anglo youths were equally likely to indicate that they agreed with the statement, "How well I do in school is very important to me" (Q #8). The two groups also were equally likely to disagree with the statement, "Much of what I am expected to do in this school is a waste of time" Q #6). Mexican-American students were even more likely than Anglos to agree with the statement, "Trying to learn what the teachers present to us in class is worthwhile" (Q #4). Further, Mexican-Americans and Anglos did not significantly differ in regards to the type of employment that they preferred after completing their schooling. Both groups expressed a strong preference for professional or business careers.

Two possible explanations for the unequal educational outcomes of Mexican-Americans and Anglos are (1) prejudice, and (2) cultural insensitivity on the part of teachers. Although during the course of fieldwork I would occasionally

hear remarks by teachers that could be interpreted as bigoted or racist, the vast majority of teachers certainly were not prejudiced. On the contrary, most were extremely dedicated in their work with students. In regards to the possibility that teachers were not sensitive to the unique problems and potentialities of Mexican-American students, it is also unlikely that this could be a major detrimental influence upon the academic performance of Mexican-American students. In two of the schools where research was conducted, there were as many Mexican-Americans on the faculty as Anglos. There appeared to be no significant difference in the learning behavior of Mexican-American students in schools with large Mexican-American faculties as compared to schools with fewer Mexican-American teachers.

Another possible explanation for differences in educational outcome between Mexican-Americans and Anglos that was offered by some teachers and administrators was that differences between these two groups had nothing to do with ethnicity, race, or language; rather, differences that are observed are attributable to socioeconomic status. Although there is evidence to support this position, for historical reasons there has long been and continues to be a very strong association between ethnicity and socioeconomic status in Corpus Christi (Taylor 1934).

It is probably true that working class youths (both Mexican-American and Anglo) are less likely to have as many books or a quiet place to study in their homes as the children of professionals. They also are less likely to have role models

among friends and relatives who can help demonstrate on a daily basis exactly what must be done in order to succeed in school. Just as importantly, however, Mexican-American youths of low socioeconomic status are less likely than Anglos from either professional or working class families to have friends and relatives who can provide instrumental support such as money for a college education or "palanca" (i.e. connections) with potential employers in desirable jobs. All of these factors may be considered proximal manifestations of the social structure of Corpus Christi that are directly related to educational outcomes.

Money also is quite important in the informal evaluations of students by their teachers and peers. For example, participation in school sponsored activities is one means of gaining recognition and respect. Such participation, however, can often be expensive. It can cost the families of girls who are interested in becoming cheerleaders or being on the pep squad $150 to $350 for unifroms and attendence at summer training camps. Such expenses obviously place a heavy burden on the budgets of low income families and undoubtably prevent many girls from participating in these prestige rendering activities. Similarly, youths interested in competitive athletics may find it difficult to participate. One boy, wishing to contribute to the support of his family, worked a full time job while going to school and playing on the school basketball team. He eventually had to be hospitalized for nervous exhaustion. Other prestige rendering activities and goods that require money include having a "quinceanera" celebration, run-

ning for homecoming queen or "class sweetheart", having access to automobiles, motorcycles, surfboards, stereos and fashionable clothes. Youths who cannot afford these things are constantly having the notion reinforced that the ideal image of American life for which school is supposed to be preparing them is somehow beyond reach.

Mr. Dominguez, a Mexican-American teacher who was sensitive to the problems that poverty can pose for the adjustment of students made the following comment:

> The problem here is not so much one of Anglos versus Mexicans. The problems that these kids have mostly boil down to economics. The kids who have the hardest time in school are the ones from the poorest families. Besides not learning and catching hell from the teachers, these kids are subject to a lot of peer pressure. For example, the girl who wears the same blouse to school for a week will be shamed by the others. These kids don't do too well with their classes but a lot of them can get by and have a pretty good time while they are going to school. The real problems for them will start when they go out and try to make a living.

The particularly crass comments of An Anglo boy named John typify the sorts of problems that low income youths often face, particularly those who do not conform to the dominant culture. In an interview I asked John who were some of his friends

John replied only half jokingly, "I only hang out with White kids." He went on to explain that he had a buddy who was Mexican, but that this friend didn't speak any Spanish and wasn't "the scuzzy kind of Meskin". John continued, saying, "Most Mexicans aren't cool."

I asked him what he meant by "cool".

Well," he replied, "the cool Mexicans are the ones who

have a little money. The rest of them just hang around by themselves."

It should be added that Mexican-American youths who were from more affluent families and who were more likely to be culturally and linguistically more similar to their Anglo peers, ran the risk of being labelled as "tio tacos", "vendidos", or sell outs. Thus, it is not just in relation to academic performance that Mexican-Americans, especially those from low income families, were more likely to experience greater difficulties, but in informal interaction with peers, as well. This is further demonstrated by responses to questionaire items regarding psychosocial adaptation. Mexican-American youths were more likely to agree with statements such as: "When I am around other people my age, I feel that they have got it together more than I do" (Q #12); "I feel alone and isolated even among my friends" (Q #15); "In general, I feel that I am not well liked by others" (Q #51). The data presented here point to some of the formidable, although not insurmountable problems that Mexican-American youths in Corpus Christi face. Obviously it is not the case that all or even most Mexican-American youths, rich or poor, are maladjusted in school. Most get along quite well, and, of course, some Anglo youths have difficulties as well. Nevertheless, the higher rate of school failure and the fact that Mexican-Americans are more likely to have difficulties in adjusting to the environment of the school strongly suggest that these differences between groups do not occur because of chance.

THE CONFRONTATION OF MYTH AND REALITY

A fundamental task of the schools as socializing agents of society is to convince young people that if they work hard in school, as in other endeavors, they will achieve success (Bowles& Gintis, 1976). This proposition has been called the myth of meritocracy. Through their experiences in school, students are taught that their success depends solely upon their individual efforts and abilities. Those who are competent and who work hard can expect to rise to the top. Conversely, those who are not successful should be considered losers. Just as success is explained by individual merit, lack of success is explained by personal deficiencies. Whether or not their teachers explicitly tell them, poor students learn in school that they must somehow be lacking in merit. So too must their parents and friends be lacking in merit if they do not posess the material symbols of success that are so highly valued in American culture.

Given the peculiar pattern of distribution of educational outcomes and wealth among Mexican-Americans and Anglos, the validity of the myth of meritocracy must be seriously questioned. Certainly the differences in educational outcomes between Anglo and Mexican-American youths cannot be explained in terms terms of the motivation or abilities of individual students. More than in anything else, it is in these contradictions of myth with reality, and aspirations with opportunity structure, that the origins of problematic psychosocial adjustment and correspondingly, the incentive to identify

oneself with subcultures whose values are different from, if not in conflict with, those of the "official" culture of the schools is to be found.

SUBCULTURAL ADAPTATIONS

The manner in which Corpus Christi adolescents adapt to their circumstances, both psychologically and socially, is related to the configuration of resources, opportunities and challenges which they face. On the basis of interviews and observations, it was found that the children of professionals in Corpus Christi tended to be more future oriented, and were more likely to conform to the idealized norms and cultural values of both their teachers and their parents. In contrast, youths from working class families tended to be more present oriented. They were more likely to find their school work to be difficult and were less likely to do well. Both Anglo and Mexican-American working class youths were likely to identify with youth cultures whose behavioral norms were different from if not inconsistent with those those officially sanctioned by the schools.

By focussing more on the present, the gap between expectations and aspirations for achievement in school and society may be overcome by the flow of everyday events. Orienting one's interests toward the social activities of the present offers a behavioral context and corresponding meaning system in which one learns to interact with peers so as to gain recognition as a competent and worthy person. Thus, the subcultures that youths from different social and economic

circumstances learn to identify with should be considered as adaptations that are related to their position in the social structure. Whether the student is Mexican-American or Anglo, of low socioeconomic status or affluent, greatly influenced but did not totally determine the subculture with which an individual identified. These subcultures and corresponding adaptational styles are briefly described below.

Preppies (Frats). Most of the youths who belonged to this subculture are the children of Anglo professionals. These youths tend to be interested in and excell in school and school related activities. School work, like other challenges which these youths face, is handled with relative ease. They usually are popular with their classmates, and are the most likely to be school leaders. They tend to have the social amenities consistent with the high status of their families in the community. As was stated by one young male preppie, "The people in my group are the all-around studs."

Kickers (Cowboys). In the local parlance, the term "kicker" is more or less synonomous with "cowboy" or "red neck". The Kickers, even more so than the Preppies, are predominantly an Anglo group. Most of the Kickers I met were the children of working class parents. At the time of the study, however, to be a Kicker was "in", and people from many backgrounds were adopting the trappings of the subculture of kickers -- i.e. cowboy hats with turkey feathers in the brims, pickup trucks, boots, and "Texas music". It may be said of the Kickers that they both work hard and play hard. Unlike the

preppie, the kicker's life is not likely to be centered around school or school activities unless the school has an active Future Farmers of America club. They were the least likely of any group to aspire to be professionals or to go to college. The kicker establishes his competence by what he does, and not by "paper shuffling." One kicker youth who was doing poorly in school explained to me that he was not the least bit concerned because he knew that he could always go to Houston and earn good wages at his Uncle George's welding shop.

Achievement Motivated Strivers. Working class youths in Corpus Christi who are not kickers face far greater challenges in adapting to their surroundings, both in material and in subjective terms. Most such youths are Mexican-Americans. A minority of working class youths dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to preparation for upward social mobility. Because they do not have some of the advantages of the children of professionals, this often implies almost a single-minded pursuit of achievement which, under certain circumstances, can sometimes isolate one from one's peers. Those who choose this cultural adaptation and fail to achieve their objectives may face great frustration. For this reason, this can be considered a subculture of high risk.

Dues Payers. Most youths whom I observed who were dues payers were Mexican-Americans from working class families, although there were some Anglos, as well. Dues payers attempt to conform to official school norms but achieve only moderate success in school. Like achievement motivated strivers, they would

like to do well in school, but have resigned themselves to the fact that they are not superior students. They generally are serious and respectful, and interested in learning what they can in the time that they have left in school.

Good Timers. Good Timers are generally working class youths who do not pay much attention to official school norms, but when they think about it, would like to do well in school. One such student by the name of Lupe is a person who is turned off to school. His attention is usually directed to more immediate interests such as playing "street football" and being with friends. According to Lupe, the things that he enjoys most are hard rock music and parties. The thing that he likes most about school is, "Walking around the halls and talking to friends." According to Lupe, "If it were not for the classes and tests, school would be great." Lupe's father is a janitor in a warehouse.

Chicanos. Chicanismo is a subculture that is explicitly oriented toward the interests, tastes and styles of working class Chicanos. The South Texas variety of the Spanish language, music and culture is glorified. Curiously, Chicanismo serves a similar adaptive function for working class Mexican-Americans as does the Kicker subculture for working class anglos. Both Kickers and Chicanos make the statement: We have no need to conform to the norms of middle class Anglo society. Our way, the way of us working folk, is legitimate. We deserve to be resepected for being the way we are, and not for trying to become something we are not." Thus, both dignify a working

class orientation -- one with Anglo cultural components, and the other with Mexican. The major difference between the Chicano and Kicker subcultures is that the Kicker way is glorified as the folk culture of Texas. Chicanismo, on the other hand, has received much less acceptance as a legitimate cultural form from Anglos and even some Mexican-Americans. Mr. Dominguez, the teacher, attempted to develop the Chicano subculture among his students in the hope that they would develop pride in themselves and their own cultural heritage. Discontent with Anglo dominated society and culture would be channelled into constructive social purposes rather than being manifested in destructive vandalism and delinquincy, as he had sometimes observed.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is clear from this study that Mexican-American youths in Corpus Christi are more likely than Anglo youths to have difficulties in conforming to the "official" norms of the schools and society. This is so despite the fact that Mexican-American youths were no less likely than Anglos to embrace those norms as the ideal. Mexican-American youths, especially those who are Spanish speaking or who are poor, were more likely to also be denied the respect and esteem of their peers and their teachers. While maintaining the desire to do well academically, youths who experience little accomplishment as a result of their school work and who do not have a clear vision of how to achieve their lofty goals for the future, tend to identify with youth oriented subcultures. The particular subculture

with which one identifies is strongly related to the configuration of opportunities and challenges confronting youths of differing social and economic circumstances.

Corpus Christi youths from different segments of the social structure select from the various subcultures the meaning system and corresponding pattern of social interaction that best facilitates their being recognized as socially competent and respectable human beings.

The examination of how choices are made between alternative subcultures by youths of differing social and economic circumstances who are looking for respect and recognition is an important component in the anthropological study of education. It explicitly links social structure to the more immediate levels of analysis associated with the motivations, values, and learning behavior of individuals. Campus Christi adolescents learn what they feel they need to know in order to meet the challenges of everyday life. The content of what is learned is greatly influenced, although not totally determined by the opportunities and challenges that are differentially distributed among the youths, consistent with the social and economic structures of the area.

TABLE 1

USUAL GRADES IN SCHOOL

	Spanish-Speaking Mex.-Ams.		English-Speaking Mex. Ams.		Anglos	
As & Bs	55	19.2%	14	14.7%	144	48.6%
Bs & Cs	141	49.1%	50	52.6%	89	35.5%
Cs & Ds	78	27.2%	26	27.4%	31	12.3%
Ds & Fs	13	4.5%	5	5.3%	9	3.6%

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